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ABSTRACT

This inaugural issue of the Journal of the National Institute on the Assessment of Experiential Learning begins with the article, "Semantic and Conceptual Ambiguities in Prior Learning Assessment" (Richard J. Hamilton). It is the basis for a session presented at the National Institute on the Assessment of Experiential Learning in June 1994. The article discusses issues important to both practitioners and theoreticians in the field of adult learning and its assessment, including the experiential learning movement, the relationship between experience and learning, arguments against the awarding of college credit for learning acquired off campus, and the strengths of prior learning assessment. The other two pieces are edited discussions that took place in the form of an electronic conference at the 1994 National Institute. "Currency in Prior Learning Assessment," edited by Rebecca C. Hull, considers how current a student's knowledge should be in the assessment of prior learning. "Subjectivity in Prior Learning Assessment," edited by Debra A. Dagavarian, provides responses to the issue of subjectivity and "checks and balances" that can be built into a prior learning assessment program to ensure objectivity. The first paper contains an 11-item bibliography. (YLB)

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JOURNAL OF THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE ON THE ASSESSMENT OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

June 11-14, 1994

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DIRECTOR'S NOTE

Each year of its existence, the National Institute on the Assessment of Experiential Learning has produced a modest publication known as its Proceedings. Now, in preparation for our seventh year, we offer this inaugural issue of the Journal of the National Institute on the Assessment of Experiential Learning.

The first article, "Semantic and Conceptual Ambiguities in Prior Learning Assessment," by Richard J. Hamilton, is the basis for a session presented at the National Institute in June of 1994. In the article Dr. Hamilton discusses issues important to both practitioners and theoreticians in the field of adult learning and its assessment.

The other two pieces are edited discussions which took place in the form of an electronic conference at the 1994 National Institute. Participants and faculty of the National Institute responded to one or both of the topics: the importance of currency in prior learning assessment and subjectivity in conducting such assessments. The wide range of responses makes reading these discussions enlightening.

The National Institute on the Assessment of Experiential Learning is held every June at the Chauncey Conference Center on the grounds of the Educational Testing Service (ETS) in Princeton, New Jersey. Prior learning assessment was born there in the early 1970s, and some of those present back then are faculty of the National Institute today. Each second weekend in June, the National Institute brings together educators from all over the world who share an interest in experiential learning assessment. It provides beginning and advanced tracks for participants of all backgrounds, time for individual consultations with faculty of the Institute, informal discussions of state-of-the-art topics in the field and a uniquely rewarding kind of professional networking.

Debra A. Dagavarian, Director
The National Institute on the Assessment of Experiential Learning

Semantic and Conceptual Ambiguities in Prior Learning Assessment

BY RICHARD J. HAMILTON

Over the centuries philosophers and educators alike have acknowledged the intimate relationship between experience and learning. From Aristotle to Aquinas, Locke and Kant to the modern American educator Dewey, there has been continuous philosophic agreement that in some way experience is indispensable for or synonymous with learning. Dewey's assumption about the value of personal experience and its relationship to learning has become a tenet of the adult education and experiential learning movements. In his volume Experience and Education, Dewey explains his notion of the connection between learning and experience:

If one attempts to formulate the philosophy of education implicit in the practices of the new education, we may, I think, discover certain common principles... To imposition from above is opposed expression and cultivation of individuality; to external discipline is opposed free activity; to learning from texts and teacher, learning through experience...

I take it that the fundamental unity of the newer philosophy is found in the idea that there is an intimate and necessary relation between the processes of actual experience and education.... The problem for progressive education is: What is the place and meaning of subject matter and organization within experience? How does the subject matter function? Is there anything inherent in experience which tends toward progressive organization? A philosophy which proceeds on the basis of rejection, of sheer opposition, will neglect these questions. It will tend to suppose that because the old education was based on ready-made organization, therefore, it suffices to reject the principle of organization in toto, instead of striving to discover what it means and how it is attained on the basis of experience...(Dewey, 1938, pp. 19-20).

In a seminal work of the adult education movement, The Meaning of Adult Education, Eduard Lindeman echoes the progressive thought of Dewey when he asserts that *"a fresh hope is astir [and from] many quarters comes the call to a new kind of education..."* (Lindeman, 1961, p.6). For Lindeman an integral assumption and the resource of highest value in this new kind of education is the recognition of the value of experience to learning because *"too much of learning consists of vicarious substitution of someone else's experience and knowledge"*. (1961, p.6).

Many adult educators have since taken this cue. Malcolm Knowles, who was profoundly influenced by Lindeman, writes that the difference between juvenile and mature experience is not just one of volume but of kind (Knowles, 1970, p. 44). Knowles details his position in The Modern Practice of Adult Education: *to an adult his experience is him. He defines who he is, establishes his self-identity, in terms of his accumulation of a unique set of experiences. So if you ask an adult who he is, he is likely to identify himself in terms of what his occupation is, where he has worked, where he has travelled, what his training and experience have equipped him to do, and what his achievements have been. An adult is what he has done.*

Because an adult defines himself largely by his experience, he has a deep investment in its value. And so when he finds himself in a situation in which his experience is not being used, or its worth minimized, it is not just his experience that is being rejected—he feels rejected as a person. (Knowles, 1970, p.44)

Knowles emphasizes his belief by stating that *"one of the most universal needs of adults is to learn how to take responsibility for their own learning through self-directed inquiry, and how to learn collaboratively with the help of colleagues rather than to compete with them, and especially how to learn by analyzing one's own experience"* (Knowles, 1970 p.45).

Other adult educators have concurred. Mezirow (1981) in his charter for andragogy calls for *"an organized and sustained effort to assist adults to learn in a way that enhances their capability to function as self-directed learners..."* and.. *"emphasize[s] experiential, participative and projective instructional methods..."* (p. 21-22). In a discussion on the contradictions between theory and practice Brookfield (1986) affirms that adult educators (himself included) *"pay frequent testimony to the need to draw on individual participants' own experiences..."* but unthinkingly fall into authoritarian modes of education which dismiss student input (Brookfield, 1986, p. 295). In his principles of effective practice, Brookfield places praxis (action and reflection) at the heart of effective facilitation of adult learning, but cautions that *"learning does not always require participants to 'do' something in the sense of performing clearly observable acts"* (Brookfield, 1986, p. 10). Jarvis (1987) in his commentary on learning in the social context writes that *"all learning begins with experience"* (p. 16).

The Experiential Learning Movement

Simultaneous with the growth of the adult education movement, an experiential learning movement also arose. Its proponents were familiar with progressive education as well as deeper traditions of learning which valued experience. They developed a new conceptualization of the relationship between experience and learning and academic strategies to operationalize their beliefs.

The work of Morris Keeton and his colleagues has been important in the development of the experiential learning movement. One of the chief accomplishments of Keeton and his associates was the founding of CAEL which originally was the Cooperative Assessment of Experiential Learning, evolved into the Council for the Advancement of Experiential Learning, and is now the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning. CAEL's purpose is to foster the recognition of experience in the practice of adult education. The experiential learning movement and CAEL have relied heavily on the writings of Kolb (1984), who developed a theoretical framework or experiential learning cycle for understanding individual experience as the source of learning and development.

In response to complex changes in American society after World War II, such as the implementation of the GI Bill, the Civil Rights Movement and the Women's Movement, both the adult education and experiential learning movements gained momentum and grew. Not surprisingly, as a result of this growth came a widespread dissemination of theories valuing adult experience

in the learning process. Each movement developed techniques, programs or other phenomena which overtly espoused the educational value of experience or were specifically named experiential learning or experiential education. However, the distinctions between the various contending theories of experience were not clearly understood by practitioners, and these distinctions spawned a series of problems and contradictions.

The most serious problem was that a principle of good practice, namely, recognition of the value of adult experience to learning, became confused with a number of teaching/learning assessment strategies, which are all now labeled as experiential learning or experiential education. This misidentification then led to other conceptual, semantic and practice ambiguities in which the relationship of experience to learning was weakly conceptualized, ill-defined, inadequately studied and tentatively comprehended. This confusion arose because there was little understanding among practitioners of the conceptual foundations which underpin the relationship between experience and learning, and because there was no consistency among theorists in their conceptualization of the meaning of experience or learning. This lack of conceptual clarity has led to the development of programs which overtly espouse valuing experience but are tentative or unclear about the nature of the relationship between experience and learning. Many of these programs do not have an articulated rationale because they have a muddled understanding of the relationship between experience and learning.

Practitioners interested in beginning (or directed to begin) a program which recognizes adult experience face a complex task. If they consult ERIC (1989), they find a list of 46 descriptors and a scope note defining experiential learning as *"learning by doing - includes knowledge and skills acquired outside of book/lecture learning situations through work, play, and other life experiences."* Among the descriptors one finds field experiences, internships, outdoor education, environmental education, cooperative education, prior learning assessment, and portfolio assessment but no direct references to adult education.

Once into the literature, a practitioner finds that discussion of the relationship between experience and learning from each of the movements is broad and imprecise. Authors writing from within the perspective of the experiential learning movement were rightfully concerned about academic legitimacy so concentrated their discussion on principles of good practice and conducted studies to determine the validity and reliability of practice. Much of their early work never made it to high profile publications, and, unfortunately, much was never published. Proponents of prior learning have certain assumptions which are the foundations of their practice: They assume that the validation of experiential learning comes through an educational institution, that learning is acquired to meet academic requirements, and that the process or manner in which learning is acquired is not as important as the product or content that is actually acquired; therefore, learning is described in terms of competencies and appears limited to the instrumental domain.

In the adult education movement the imprecision is compounded because there are multiple philosophical perspectives and rationales; each with distinct definitions of learning and experience. (Proponents of what is called liberal adult education such as Mortimer Adler, Everett Dean Martin or R.W.K.

Patterson, actually believe that experience can interfere with learning.) None of the perspectives from the adult education movement relies upon an association with formal schooling for its rationale, and theorists like Lindeman and Mezirow actually exclude programs organized by schools as part of an adult education movement. Adult education theorists generally do not emphasize experience as a formal academic learning strategy; rather they find an integral, holistic role for experience that has implications in many domains of learning.

In addition to the imprecision in the use of the word experience, there are also semantic ambiguities concerning the use of the term learning. Brookfield (1988) writes that when used as a noun, learning may mean *"the internal consciousness change in which cognitive and affective structures are altered as a result of increased knowledge"* (p. 15); as a verb, it is seen as a *"collection of activities ... such as setting appropriate goals, locating resources, designing self-instruction, trying out different methods and evaluating progress"* (p. 15). The former definition appears to be a product while the latter a process the learner undergoes to obtain and measure the desired educational product. In counterpoint, Long (1988) disputes Brookfield's definitions of learning as too narrow especially in light of other philosophies of education (p.3). So, an additional question complicating the task of the practitioner, who would clarify the meaning of experiential learning, is to first clarify the meaning of learning.

The Relationship Between Experience and Learning

Keeton (1991) concurs that understanding of the relationship between experience and learning is beset with ambiguities. He states that those interested in investigating this relationship must distinguish among stipulative, conventional and scholarly definitions of both experience and learning. Stipulative definitions are those derived by an individual and have limited usefulness; conventional definitions are agreements by a group that are allegations of fact that may be disputed as accurate or inaccurate; scholarly definitions are scientific and used to organize data and inquiry in quest of new knowledge. He believes that the primary difference between his own definition of experience and Kant's, or between Knowles' definition of experience and Kant's, is that they are several levels of abstraction apart; that is, his and Knowles' definitions stipulate educational practice, while Kant's describes a philosophical reality. The definitions of experience and learning in both the adult education and the experiential movements, and therefore the practices in both, suffer from this imprecision.

From this brief overview, one can begin to see the lack of conceptual and semantic clarity surrounding the complex relationship between experience and learning. This imprecision coupled with the widespread acknowledgment of the utility of experience to adult education practice leaves practitioners rightly confused as to how the relationship should affect practice. Jarvis (1987) succinctly states the problem:

...some writers have tended to regard experience as something that is concrete, and even affective rather than cognitive. This is certainly true of those thinkers whose main educative concern is often termed "experiential education", where

they actually mean affective education. However, to restrict experience to the affective domain is to limit it far too greatly, since it is possible to experience the world through a number of senses. Merleau-Ponty (Mallin, 1975, p. 15), for instance, claims that people relate to the world in a combination of the cognitive, the perceptual, the affective and the practical. Hence, experience is not limited here to concrete nor to affective experiences only. Indeed, a similar criticism may be leveled at those scholars who limit learning to the cognitive domain, since this assumes that the individual only responds to experiences in the life world in a cognitive manner. (Jarvis, 1987, p. 17).

The Argument

How has this imprecision affected prior learning assessment practice? Some colleges have entirely rejected the idea of awarding college credit for learning acquired off campus, while others merely list a prior learning process in the college catalog, doing little to encourage its use and encumbering the process with bureaucratic complexity to daunt even the most persistent of students. Arguments against the practice of awarding credit for prior learning are many; opponents frequently charge that the quality of learning acquired off campus is inferior to that acquired on campus, particularly as regards theoretical learning. Additionally, opponents claim that the ambience of the campus is more conducive to the acquisition of sophisticated learning; e.g. the availability of libraries, cultural events, or lectures. Another criticism is the lack of interaction or discussion with professors and other students, a practice that cannot be duplicated off campus. Some professors worry that prior learning methods will enable the college to cut faculty positions because the students can learn the concepts off campus. The most serious charge, however, is that the value of a college degree is being diluted by such practice; adult students are receiving credit for merely having existed.

These arguments are easily refuted. Many adult students are employed and have the opportunity to discuss real life work problems with experts each day; professors are not the only experts. A working adult probably has the money to avail him or herself of enriching cultural activities, unlike many students without income; so this argument pales. Many professors fearing lay-offs because assessments enabled a retrenchment of course sections, might be surprised to find that instead of teaching introductory courses in their respective disciplines, they are free to schedule advanced courses because the students have mastered introductory concepts through experience. However, the opposite can also be true.

The quality argument is more complex and it varies somewhat from process to process. Some professors are skeptical about the rigor of prior learning tests. This argument, when it is applied to standarized examinations, particularly those that have been normed like the CLEPs, is once again easily refuted. The examination process is not only similar to that used in a traditional college classroom but has the added advantages of being developed by a team of subject experts, pilot tested, and normed. In addition, for some current tests the norms were set almost a generation ago before the hyper-inflation of grades. Finally, colleges have the opportunity and the right to set higher standards for an award of credit than those recommended by a spon-

soring agency such as the College Board. This assures a more reliable award of academic credit.

Some professors argue that examinations like CLEPs can't capture the essence of the interaction that transpires in their classrooms. They claim that the classroom transaction is synergistic; i.e., more occurs than the simple transfer of knowledge. There is the potential for communicative and transformative learning. Ironically, teachers do not test for these synergistic elements of the classroom transaction and rely on tests that measure elements similar to those measured in the CLEPs. Yet, tests designed by individuals lack much of the sophistication of a CLEP examination. Once again, some educators forget that learning does not occur in a vacuum and that most communicative and transformative learning occurs outside a classroom.

The rejection of portfolio assessment as a method of prior learning assessment is easier to understand only because the process is so different from usual credit awarding processes. Just as the first attempts in the nineteenth century to introduce practical subjects into the college curriculum were fraught with absurdities, misunderstandings and frauds, so too has been the early history of portfolio assessment. Initial efforts at portfolio assessment were pragmatic and atheoretical; incomplete or faulty understanding of both learning and experience led to programs that did little more than review resumes and grant credit for living.

These programs tended to be initiated by administrators, student services staff, marginal faculty, or faculty who became marginal by virtue of their involvement in an innovation. People in the same institution working on different innovations - and sometimes even similar ones - were frequently isolated from one another (Gamson, 1989, p. 4). Cross (1981) suspects that many colleges using nontraditional means to recruit adult students are *"more interested in meeting their own needs for survival than in serving the learning needs of adults"* (p. 35).

The most serious problem portfolio assessment faces on campus is the muddled understanding that many professors have of the prior learning processes and their inadequate or incomplete understanding of the complex relationship between experience and learning. For some professors, learning is understood as knowledge acquisition only; that is, it is a product related to an academic discipline, and the process used to acquire this knowledge is secondary. Within this understanding, it would be possible to be quite successful in a college course without attending any classes: A student need merely to pass the examination and to write an acceptable paper. Experience is perceived as activity that is an extension of traditional learning but not integral. For these professors, the argument of the value added by classroom participation is moot.

Other professors perceive experiential learning in practical areas such as laboratory settings as quite appropriate, even indispensable for learning, but dismiss prior experiential learning via portfolio. They conceive experiential learning as an activity designed to support classroom practice, but prior learning is not important. Their chief criticism of portfolio assessment is that because the learning was not under control of the college, its quality cannot be assured; but sponsored experiential learning, e.g., cooperative education, is

acceptable for credit because the institution retains quality control. This discrepancy in perspectives is due in part to fears that some professors or colleges have about enrollment, to philosophical differences with the notion of awarding credit for anything not included in a college course, or to an inadequate understanding of the relationship between experience and adult learning.

The Strengths of Prior Learning Assessment

The greatest strength of prior learning assessment is the sophisticated understanding of the relationship between experience and learning that it embraces as opposed to that of traditional education. The experiential learning movement has attempted to raise the consciousness of the traditional educational community through its relentless pursuit of a vision of learning that incorporates an equal place in the curriculum for "real life" activities. This concept of real life problem solving reflects not only Dewey's beliefs but also Lindeman's ideal of situational learning and Knowles' conceptualization of andragogy as a technology of adult education. This deeper understanding of the meaning of experience and its role in learning is a step toward a greater understanding of the entire learning process.

Despite their success in broadening the educational community's definition of experience, adherents of prior learning assessment have not moved their comprehensive understanding of learning to center stage in educational debates. Some adherents have limited their definition of learning to that of a product, and this narrow concept of learning as measurable competencies limits the potential of portfolio assessment. For them, all learning including the affective must be described in terms of behavioral change (a product) which is an oversimplified understanding of the complex process of learning and overlooks current debate regarding communicative and transformative learning. ■

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CURRENCY IN PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT

EDITED BY REBECCA C. HULL

How current should a student's knowledge be in the assessment of prior learning? Obviously, in some subjects, such as Shakespearean sonnets or the Civil War, currency is less relevant. But many subjects, such as computer science and nuclear technology, have changed dramatically in the past few years, and will continue to change rapidly in the future. How current need be the student's knowledge in areas such as these? Does the credit's placement in the student's degree program impact on currency? Consider, for example, the student who used to dance ballet but no longer does because of arthritic pain; does currency matter?

This was one of the thought-provoking discussion topics posed in the electronic conference at the National Institute. Responses generated by the participants follow.

1. Currency should not be an issue in the assessment of prior learning. The issues that are most pressing are breadth and depth of learning, whether or not the learning is college level and that the student shows conclusive evidence of learning. Currency is a guideline imposed by a school or department with regard to degree requirements. It should not enter into the picture when we discuss whether or not a person has previously acquired knowledge, and can prove this conclusively. Not all learning can be applied, so currency of application, or capability of application cannot always be questioned. As an example, knowledge of many of the liberal arts (history for one) cannot necessarily be applied. On the other hand, current knowledge of computer programming or tax accounting is usually requested as part of a particular course description. In such cases, current knowledge is requested and must be demonstrated.

2. The issue of currency should only be relevant in subject areas where technology is rapidly changing. Nuclear technology and computer science technology can change every six months. It is therefore imperative that a student desiring credit in these areas be as current as possible, and that he or she be willing to demonstrate that currency if requested to do so. On the other hand, the issue of currency should be less relevant for a dancer who, though no longer able to dance because of age or disability, is able to provide irrefutable evidence that he or she, at one time, could dance.

3. About the ballet question: a vital question is—For what will the certification be used? Will it mean to a prospective employer that here is a person who can be hired to join the ballet as a dancer? If so—if it is like a license—then currency is relevant and arthritis is disallowing. On the other hand, if the certification means that the person "knows how" to dance—or "has had experience" then perhaps currency is irrelevant. At least it would not necessarily be relevant if the prospective employer is looking for a teacher or a consultant or a writer. In summary, currency is related to purpose (of certification). I certainly would not want to hire an office assistant who has been certified as excellent in the making of copies with the old purple ditto process, but has not heard of Xerox, Sharp, etc.

4. Currency is a major issue in the assessment of prior learning. If you claim to have knowledge of a subject which is currently taught, you must be able to demonstrate that you have current knowledge of that topic. Many fields change rapidly, and if your knowledge is of the history of the topic, the credit you receive should be for the knowledge of the history of that topic.

5. Currency is not a major issue in assessment of prior learning, even in subjects such as computer science and nuclear technology or AIDS and drug resistant tuberculosis, information changes daily. Information in textbooks in certain areas is at least five years old and, in some cases obsolete, by the time they are written. On the other hand, information regarding AIDS was not even available before the 1970s. The issue of currency should be related to the purpose of the student's program and life goals.

6. The whole issue of currency seems so arbitrary to me. Certainly if some kind of licensure is at stake based on these credits, sure, the knowledge should be current. But for assessment of prior learning, it almost seems to be a contradiction in terms. Either you give credit for what someone has learned, whenever they learned it, or you don't. To impose parameters for some types of learning and not others seems unfair. After all, if a job required a B.A., wouldn't the degree be as relevant if it were 10 years or two years old? I'm probably on the laissez-faire end of this issue because I think, for a liberal arts degree, there shouldn't be a statute of limitations on transfer credit either.

7. Currency should not matter at all. Knowledge is knowledge, and should be valid if it meets criteria other than currency (such as its being college-level, etc.). As long as a student can validate that he or she had a body of knowledge at some particular point in time, the assessment should be encouraged. What matters more is the quality and depth of the knowledge. We accept transfer credits from many years ago; why should the acceptance of (or assessment of) PLA credit be any different? It shouldn't!

8. Currency is an issue depending upon the subject area. As many of you have said already, if you are dealing with a rapidly changing field (e.g., computers, engineering),currency has to be considered. This is especially true if a student is getting PLA credit for a class which is a prerequiste for another class. Other areas such as history or ballet principles are in a way timeless areas of knowledge. As long as the student can adequately narrate what he/she knows it does not matter when the knowledge was acquired. A very general rule of thumb our evaluators use is our time limit on accepting transfer hours. There are certain skill based classes that we will not accept in transfer if they were taken many years ago. We apply those time limits to PLA.

9. The lack of current knowledge on a subject is reason to limit or withhold credit awards unless the credit is sought for history on the subject.

10. Currency cannot matter in assessments. The assessment is of an applicant's competency at a level of a body of knowledge. If the field has practitioners, then views of the field are changing dynamically, spatially and temporally. How can anyone define currency with any precision to be reliably applied by assessors?

11. In reference to the previous entry, the definition of currency is within the domain of the faculty assessor. In other words, the expertise it takes to evaluate the content and scope of the learning should be the same expertise used to determine whether or not the learning is current. I do not believe, however, that currency is an important issue. It may have some validity in instances where the current state of knowledge is so far ahead of where it was initially (as in computer science), but that is the only circumstance in which currency might matter.

12. Currency is most important in the students' major. In the general education and elective area, current knowledge does not matter. In awarding credit for prior learning in the major, one criteria must be current knowledge because of the sequential nature of our courses in the major - and our claim that we are producing graduates who can be competetive in their fields.

13. Currency matters, but only in terms of the potential student and potential content. Learning how to learn should never be stale. Skills don't get stale, especially if they are used. Knowledge can be stale—physics for instance, but basically aren't we getting excited for very little? Think of how stale classroom instruction can be with texts and notes that are literally crumbling. Our insistence on currency is inconsistent with what the tenure system has imposed upon us. Perhaps because PLA is the "new kid on the block," we are expected to be purer than pure.

14. The need for currency depends on the subject and on the outcomes desired. For example, a course in nutrition could focus on the general body of knowledge which has changed very little over the years, or on current issues in nutrition. The focus of the particular course would dictate the importance of currency.

15. Currency is a subject about which I have been concerned. We need to address this issue at our institution. I think a dancer could possibly receive credit for understanding and demonstrating key elements of dance or choreography. Yet, she should not necessarily receive credit for dance itself.

16. There are those who would say that currency should only be an issue when it is regarding a portfolio on finance. (Pardon the pun). In general I would agree that currency is not relevant for a majority of topics, particularly general education or liberal arts courses. However, subjects in nursing/health care, technology, computers, etc., have bodies of knowledge that are continually evolving. Ultimately, the currency policy should mirror that of non-PLA transfer credit: if we were looking at a transcript with the credit listed as a course (rather than looking at a portfolio) would the credit transfer to our college in fulfillment of a current degree requirement? For example, I work with many students who studied health 20 years ago. This course is no longer equivalent to the more comprehensive, modern course on Wellness which we require. The transcripted course would not fulfill current degree requirements; neither would the portfolio of someone whose experience was 20 years old with no recent application. One way to possibly address the gap might be to have the person supplement his or her narrative with a review of current literature.

Participants expressed very definite opinions about the issue of currency. Some felt the importance placed on currency should depend entirely on the nature of the topic itself, that in rapidly changing fields (such as computer science) faculty must ensure that students' knowledge is up-to-the-minute. Others felt the need for currency should depend on where in a student's degree program the course is to be placed or on how the knowledge will be applied. In other words, currency would be more important in a student's major than if the credits were to be used as free electives. Most would agree that a student who plans upon graduation to design bridges should probably have current knowledge of structural design.

Some arguments against the need for currency point out that textbooks are not always up-to-date, and that professors do not always keep up with changes in their fields. Job applicants are rarely penalized for having degrees that were earned years before.

One major difficulty comes in attempting to define currency. At what point is knowledge of a topic re-defined as knowledge of the history of that topic? Interpretation of the validity of knowledge gained continues to weigh heavily as a responsibility of institutional policy-makers and of the faculty who assess prior learning. ■

SUBJECTIVITY IN PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT

EDITED BY DEBRA A. DAGAVARIAN

Any assessment of learning can be subjective, from that which takes place in the classroom to the assessment of a portfolio. Faculty might bring in their own biases as to what constitutes an appropriate body of knowledge for the portfolio under assessment, and they certainly have a range of opinions regarding quality. How, then, does the PLA director address the issue of subjectivity? Is it ignored because it also happens in the classroom setting? Are there "checks and balances" one can build into a PLA program in order to insure objectivity? Below are responses to this issue from participants in one of the electronic conferences held at the National Institute.

1. Among the checks and balances that our school uses are an "evidence compendium" and a quality review process. The evidence compendium allows the faculty reviewer to suggest exactly what evidence and information the portfolio should contain. When the type and nature of evidence is identified by several faculty, portfolios seem to be more consistent in their contents. The quality review process asks that three faculty examine a portfolio, independent of one another. Upon completion of the reviews, we consider consistency of assessments. Results vary.

2. A certain amount of subjectivity is unavoidable; this is the nature of the mentor-student relationship. In a course-driven program, the content of the portfolio should reflect the actual course description on which it is based. The faculty member should refrain from evaluating the portfolio on the basis of what he/she would cover in a course of the same title. Students should choose course descriptions which detail the content (list topic by topic) and where possible supply the faculty assessor with a course syllabus. For courses which many students attempt through portfolio, faculty assessors may want to draw up a set of guidelines to help ensure reliability.

3. We should not ignore subjectivity simply because it is one of the many problems that we share with our traditional friends. Instead we should share with them the progress we make in getting around the problem. Having more than one assessment method and more than one assessor is one way to make progress. Seeking student feedback is another—and we don't use it enough. Finally, we can get some help by having, and using, an appeals process. That will help when the subjectivity problem surfaces as an evaluation that doesn't grant as much credit as it should. The other problem—granting too much credit—needs another kind of "appeals" process: a review system that catches overly generous awards and kicks them back for further review.

4. Subjectivity is unavoidable because everyone has biases or ideas about the way things should be done. One possible way to address subjectivity is to have participating faculty set up guidelines for all subject areas to be assessed. These guidelines would include specific information about essential information and documentation which should be included in any credit worthy portfolio. Another possible way to ensure objectivity is to set up a committee of experts in the subject area who collaborate on the evaluation of a portfolio.

There is safety in numbers and, possibly, objectivity too.

5. A certain amount of subjectivity is most likely unavoidable in any type of assessment that is not completely objective and fact-based. One way in which biases can be controlled is by sumitting the portfolio, or portions of it, to other faculty who may have some limited expert knowledge in a specific area of the field. These faculty could be members of the same institution or a different one. Another option would be to send the portfolio to a faculty member having the same expertise but who teaches in a different area of the U.S. or who teaches students of a different culture in the same geographical area. This would provide interesting feedback on cultural biases,

6. It may be worthwhile to note different sources of subjectivity, each of which can contribute to objectivity of the final assessment. For instance, six observers seeing the evidence from different perspectives may all see accurately, but from complementary positions. The solution is to pool the data. But six observers may each be using different criteria of adequate evidence. The solution is to share views of what the appropriate criteria for this student's claim are and to negotiate for consensus.

7. Subjectivity will be always be an issue because people are human and therefore different. In my institution the problem is somewhat diminished since we have standardized course descriptions and course objectives. Using more than one evaluator is also a regular procedure. Even so, we do have our disagreements. To help to develop a more cohesive way of thinking, we hold monthly meetings to discuss (yes, and sometimes argue!). These meetings have proven to be very useful.

8. The issue of subjectivity is one with which I am very concerned. It is impossible at my school (because of our small size) to have faculty assessing portfolios for students they don't know personally. So it has happened in the past that a faculty member pushed hard for a student to get credit for a weak portfolio on the basis that the student obviously had the skills, even if it was not evident in the portfolio. The issue of subjectivity is also tied closely with the issue of expert assessors, since my faculty feel, to some extent, that being experts on assessment means that they should be able to judge learning outside of their academic discipline. Case in point: last month a Canadian student in his 60s turned in a portfolio for the maximum credit we allow - 30 credits - based on 25 years in the automobile industry. The assessment team: a Jungian scholar, a literature faculty/writer, a feminist scholar/lawyer. They all agreed that the portfolio did not deserve all the credit the student wanted. Because the student was so upset, I asked one of our business faculty, who has an MBA, what he thought, and he felt confident that the full amount should have been awarded. The situation is obviously more complicated than this short synposis gives, but it highlights the importance of having faculty experts by discipline if the judgement is based largely on breadth and depth of critical thinking.

9. The issue of subjectivity will be with us for time and it poses a challenge that is healthy for us. A team of evaluators (three) and an appeals process are deterrants to an individual exercising fringe behavior.

10. Subjectivity is unavoidable in education. What may be sought is some consensus that a student evidences the level of competency needed to obtain credit or certification. Consensus may be reached after the fact, on the basis of the product produced by the applicant. This provides a fairly poor measure of the applicant's competency, however. The applicant is then in the position of knowing the required relevant information and guessing what the reviewers are using for criteria in their assessment. Clear criteria by reviewers provide applicants with the information they need to respond in such a way as to differentiate what the applicant does and does not know. This shifts much of the responsibility for time spent on assessment to the assessors.

11. Subjectivity is a fact of life, and consequently, a fact of PLA. But I think there are ways of dealing with it. First, one can use more than one expert in assessing a student's learning. There can be more than one content expert, or at least one content expert and one methodology (or process) expert. The methodology expert can be an expert in PLA — one who can make certain the correct rules of assessment have been applied. Ideally, however, there will be one methodology expert and at least two content experts.

12. Objectivity is simply the controlled application of the subjective experience. The very essence of the scientific method reflects this principle. To deal with subjectivity, we (1) have to recognize and acknowledge that knowledge is by its very nature subjective, i.e., knowledge is our personal fiction about how the world works; and (2) help students develop the skills to control their appplication of the subjective so that it has meaning to others within the social world. The subjectivity issue also balances the continuum between the issues of "personal knowledge" (i.e., this is what I know from my own personal experience) and "social knowledge" (i.e., what is known by the group or collective experience). The trick in a PLA course is to help students express their personal knowledge in terms of social knowledge.

13. Subjectivity is a natural factor in portfolio evaluation; it is human nature. However, one of the checks and balances we have is for the student to request a review of the portfolio if credit was not awarded, and another evaluator may be asked to review the portfolio. For skills courses, i.e., computer studies and math, the issue of subjectivity is diminished. And, the evaluator never "sees" the student; we rely on portfolio review so objectivity is more easily maintained.

14. I agree that we should not ignore subjectivity, but I suspect that developing an elaborate appeals process is not the answer. Appeals processes suggest that a "fair" appraisal can be made after a group of individuals gets together to determine the amount of subjectivity in the original PLA. That assumption is faulty in itself. I believe that students do better when they know from the beginnning that the process is subjective and that they will have to conform with somebody's expectations eventually, no matter how "subjective." Talking with the assessor before the portfolio is submitted often acccomplishes the same thing that talking with the admittedly biased classroom professor does, i.e.: the student does better.

15. Objectives and student learning outcomes have been defined for courses at our institution which may be taught in as many as 16 locations.

Faculty are expected to teach so that a minimum of 80% of the course outcomes will be the same; the 20% is what is left for their "subjectivity." We can then apply this classroom standard to the PLA program.

16. A well developed portfolio invites assessors to focus on learning outcomes that have links with their course contents. Therefore, if they have designed their course outline properly, they should be able to concentrate on the results and forget about personal biases.

17. The checks and balances that we use include adherence to established standards for professional training assessment. We use only faculty members from our college to evaluate essays. We depend upon their expertise to award credit. They have been trained in the criteria required for successful completion of the essays.

The responses vary in their benevolence toward the concept of subjectivity in the assessment of experiential learning. Some participants in the electronic conference find that subjectivity can better be addressed by factors prior to the actual assessment, such as guidelines used by students in preparing portfolios. Others find that how we prepare faculty conducting assessments, in terms of the criteria they use, is most important. Still, there are those who believe that the process employed in assessing portfolios and post-assessment options eclipse these other factors, that the overall method is paramount.

It is fascinating to see the diversity of the responses, with some educators viewing subjectivity as a factor to work with, rather than against. Whatever one's perspective, the concept of subjectivity remains an issue of considerable interest in the assessment of knowledge. ■

Faculty of the Institute

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Debra A. Dagavarian is the director of Testing and Assessment at Thomas Edison State College. Throughout her years in higher education as an administrator, faculty member and consultant, she has developed a strong commitment to serving the adult learner. Formerly assistant dean for Assessment at Empire State College, she also has been director of Evening Programs and director of Academic Advising at Mercy College. She holds a Doctorate in Education from Rutgers University. Dr. Dagavarian's publications range from articles on outcomes assessment to books on children's baseball fiction.

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